DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 459 322 CE 082 605

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TITLE Victims of Ageist Attitudes--But How Do the Older Workers Themselves View Their Competence?
PUB DATE 2000-10-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Research Network Meeting of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults, "Adult Education and the Labour Market VI" (Seville, Spain, October 19-22, 2000).
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.evu.ruc.dk/eng/events/seville/tikkanen.html.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Learning; *Age Differences; Age Discrimination; Aging (Individuals); *Competence; Employee Attitudes; *Employees; Foreign Countries; Job Performance; Job Skills; Older Adults; *Older Workers; Self Concept; Self Concept Measures; Self Esteem; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); Small Businesses; Vocational Maturity; Work Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *European Union

ABSTRACT

A study examined how older employees themselves assess the effects of age on their learning at work and job competence and how older workers rate the importance of different aspects of competence. Then the study compared the results of the first two questions by looking at the subjective age-effect ratings on competence aspects of various importance. The data used in the study are part of a larger, European Union research project that used completed questionnaires from 167 employees, with an age range of 24-62 years from small and medium-sized businesses. For this study, only the responses of 91 persons who were aged 40 years or older were used. The results of the study showed the following: (1) most of the general competence domains listed in the questionnaire were rated as age-independent; (2) when age was reported to influence competence this effect was most typically positive, indicating improvement with age; (3) all of the general competence domains listed were rated important or very important; and (4) most of the competence domains that were rated most important by a majority of the respondents were also the ones that were rated to improve by age or to be age-independent. The study concluded that in many respects age was not reported to have any effect on the domains of competence assessed, although this result gives no indication of the actual level of these competencies. (Contains 18 references.) (KC)

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ED 459 322

Paper to be presented in ESREA research network meeting
Adult Education and the Labour Market VI, Seville, October 19-22, 2000

Victims of ageist attitudes

– But how do the older workers themselves view their competence?

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Introduction

The situation of older workers in the labour market is partly influenced by the negative attitudes held towards them. These attitudes can have an impact on the views we have of their job competence, but they can also have an impact on the actual level of their competence. Studies have shown that especially the ageist attitudes held by employers and managers are related to the early exclusion of the older workers from the labour market as well as often from education and training opportunities in working life.

There are, however, at least three issues that should be kept in mind, when thinking about the relationship between age and competence. Firstly, the impact of age itself is difficult, if not impossible, to filter out from other effects on learning and competence development during the life-course. Furthermore, chronological age is but one aspect of age (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1990; Marin, 1996), and likely to have very little direct impact on job competence. Secondly, it is not unproblematic to examine attitudes and their effects, due to unequivocal definitions of the concept and consequent variety in measuring them. Attitudes toward age and competence of older workers have mainly been studied "objectively", by targeting inquiries extensively to employers and management, as well as to HRD personnel (e.g. Taylor & Walker, 1994; Baumann, Lyng & Lahn, 1997; Walker, 1997; Walker & Maltby, 1997; Taylor & Walker, 1998). Studies, which would take the views of older workers themselves as a starting point hardly exist (Tikkanen, 1998), nor do studies based on subjective self-reports of perceived age-effects on learning and competence. Thirdly, competence is not one single entity (e.g. Ellström, 1996), nor is it stable, but multi-dimensional and dynamic by nature. Although competence is generally assumed to be an individual issue[1], approaching it from the point of view of older workers shows clearly, as Ellström (1996) has suggested, that it is also strongly socially constructed[1].

In this paper our goal has been to address the above critics by focusing on three main questions. Firstly we examine how do older employees themselves assess the effects of age on their learning at work and job competence. Secondly, we examine how do the older workers rate the importance of different aspects of competence. Thirdly, we have compared the results of the two first questions by looking at the subjective age-effect ratings on competence

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[1] More on the multidimensional nature of job competence in e.g. Ellström, 1996.

aspects of various importance. The latter especially should give us a more accurate picture of the age-competence relationship.

Method

The data and the subjects

The data used in the article are a part of a larger, European Union research project *Working Life Changes and Training of Older Workers* (WORKTOW; Lahn, Tikkanen, Lyng, et al, 1997) and it were collected during March - April 1999 in Central Finland. A total of 167 employees (with an age range of 24-62 years) from six SMEs (small and medium size enterprises) completed the questionnaire. The six companies represented three different types of work: manual (industrial), communicational (services), and informational (office).

For the analysis presented in this paper we have included only those subjects who were 40-years of age or older, a total of 91 persons. This is a somewhat younger definition of an older worker than the most commonly used 45-years age-limit (Tikkanen, 1998). Table 1 below shows the distributions of gender, education and work type within this sample. The mean age of the respondents was 47.7 years and a majority of them were men (60%).

Table 1. Description of the participants in the study

		N	%
Gender	Female	36	39.6
	Male	55	60.4
Level of education *	No formal education	5	5.7
	Lower vocational education	29	33.0
	Upper vocational education	54	61.4
Work-type	Manual	6	6.6
	Communication	26	28.6
	Information	59	64.8
	Total	91	100

* 3 missing cases

As table 1 shows, the level of education among the participants was high. Education was categorised into three levels: no formal vocational education, vocational training course or

program at a lower vocational level, and upper vocational level or university degree. A majority had completed upper vocational education (61.4 %). Most of the respondents represented information work (64.8 %), while there were only a few working in industry (6.6 %). As is typical in working life the representation of different work types was strongly divided by gender. All employees in industry and most in information work (78%) were men, whereas in service-sector a majority (89 %) were women.

Questionnaire

The data were collected with a questionnaire. The part of it, which focused on ratings on age-effects, comprised of a list of sixteen different abilities and skills addressing various aspects in learning and work competence. The list was formed by drawing from earlier studies on attitudes towards older workers (e.g. Ahola & Huuhtanen, 1995; Gibson, Zerbe & Franken, 1993; Hassell & Perrewe, 1995; Lyon & Pollard, 1997; Taylor & Walker, 1994; Warr & Pennington, 1994). The sixteen items included were: physical capacity, creativity, skills related to new technology, problem solving ability, ability to handle stress, productivity, social skills, flexibility (in work), adaptability to change, (work) experience, initiative, ability to make decisions, learning ability, learning and development needs, willingness to learn new things, and willingness to participate in training. We have considered the aspects concerning learning and training participation as integral to the total job competence.

The employees were asked how have they experienced that age has effected in their work on the various (16) domains of competence listed in the questionnaire. A three-point scale was used for the ratings: ability or skill 'getting better' (3),'staying stable' (2), or 'getting worse' (1) by age. When assessing the importance of these domains of competence, the scale used was: the skill or ability 'very important' (3), 'important' (2), 'not important at all' (1) in my work.

Data analysis

Frequency and percentage distribution analyses (Cross-tabulation) were used to examine the effect of age on competence and the ratings of importance of various competence domains. The measure used to analyse statistical significance of the observed differences was Pearson's Chi-square.

Results

The age-effect ratings

Table 2 shows how the respondents reported age to have affected (or not) on their job competence (see Appendix 1 for means and standard deviations). A majority of the respondents assessed that most (10/16) of the domains of competence stay stable by age. More than 60% of the employees reported that age has improved their experience, social skills, ability to make decisions and to solve problems. Almost a half (46.7%) of these older workers also reported that their ability to handle stress has improved by age. Physical capacity was the only aspect of competence that a majority (58.4 %) assessed to impair by age. Further, almost one out of four (23.6%) reported that age impairs skills related to new technology. About 80% of the respondents reported that age has no impact on learning-related competencies, and about 70% that willingness to participate in training is age-independent.

Table 2. Subjective assessment of the effect of age on various domains of job competence (%)

Domains of competence	Getting better by age	Staying stable by age	Getting worse by age
Experience	78.4	21.6	-
Social skills	69.7	30.3	-
Ability to make decisions	66.3	31.5	2.2
Problem solving ability	60.0	37.8	2.2
Ability to handle stress	46.7	35.6	17.8
Flexibility (in work)	35.2	63.6	1.1
Initiative	24.7	64.0	11.2
Creativity	22.7	70.5	6.8
Adaptability to change	18.2	70.5	11.4
Productivity	12.6	73.6	13.8
Physical capacity	4.5	37.1	58.4
Skills related to new technology	2.2	74.2	23.6
Willingness to learn new things	13.6	81.8	4.5
Learning and development needs	11.2	77.5	11.2
Willingness to participate in training	10.0	72.2	17.8
Learning ability	2.3	79.5	18.2

The importance of various domains of competence in one's work

Table 3 shows how the respondents evaluated the importance of the 16 domains of competence in their own work (see Appendix 1 for means and standard deviations). A majority of the respondents rated all the domains important or very important. Very important domains of competence by a majority were social skills (69 %), problem solving ability (68.6 %), experience (66.3 %), ability to handle stress (59.8 %) and to make decisions (59.8 %), productivity (55.8 %), skills related to new technology (51.7 %), and learning ability (51.1 %).

Table 3. Assessment of the importance of various domains of job competence in one's daily work (%)

Domains of competence	Very important	Important	Not important
Social skills	69.0	31.0	-
Problem solving ability	68.6	30.2	1.2
Experience	66.3	33.7	-
Ability to handle stress	59.8	39.1	1.1
Ability to make decisions	59.8	37.9	2.3
Productivity	55.8	37.2	7.0
Skills related to new technology	51.7	46.0	2.3
Adaptability to change	47.7	52.3	-
Flexibility (in work)	47.1	52.9	-
Creativity	43.2	45.5	11.4
Physical capacity	40.9	55.7	3.4
Initiative	40.2	54.0	5.7
Learning ability	51.1	47.7	1.1
Willingness to learn new things	44.8	54.0	1.1
Learning and development needs	42.5	56.3	1.1
Willingness to participate in training	40.2	58.6	1.1

Type of work was naturally related to the ratings of importance. The employees working within the field of communication or information work rated problem solving ability, skills related to new technology, and flexibility more often very important in their own work than did the employees in manual work. Social skills, flexibility, and adaptability to change were more important to employees who were working in communication (service sector) than to those in manual or in information work. The competence domains rated the most important in manual work were experience, ability to handle stress, and physical capacity. In

communication these were social skills, experience, ability to handle stress, and flexibility. For employees working in information work the top-three most important domains of competence were problem solving ability, productivity, and experience.

As expected, some gender differences were also found. This was because the gendered nature of many occupational sectors in working life. In our sample work in communication (services) was dominated by women and manual and information work by men.

Age-effects on the most important competencies?

So far we have examined, how do the older workers themselves assess the effect of age on their job competence and how weighing the importance of various domains of competence varies in the work of the subjects. To gain more accurate information about the self-perceived impact of age on competence, we compared the results of the first two questions. The comparison is shown in table 4. Table 4 firstly lists the domains of competence which were rated very important in work by a majority of the respondents (from Table 3) and secondly indicates how age was predominantly rated to effect on these issues (from Table 2).

Table 4. Effect of age on very important competence domains

Domains of job competence	% rating the domain very important	Age-effect (% reporting this way)
Social skills	69.0	Improves (69.7)
Problem solving ability	68.6	Improves (60.0)
Experience	66.3	Improves (78.4)
Ability to handle stress	59.8	Improves (46.7)
Ability to make decisions	59.8	Improves (66.3)
Productivity	55.8	No effect (73.6)
Skills related to new technology	51.7	No effect (74.2)
Learning ability	51.1	No effect (79.5)

The results of this comparison showed firstly that the most important domains of job competence were also rated to improve by age by a majority of the respondents. Besides experience these domains were social skills, problem solving ability, and abilities to handle stress and make decisions. Secondly, the other very important competence domains age was assessed to have no influence upon by a majority of the respondents. Interestingly enough

these domains – productivity, skills related to new technology, and learning ability - are at the same time the ones, most often used in negative argumentation concerning the competence of the older workers in current working life.

Discussion & Conclusions

The results of this study showed firstly that most of the general competence domains listed in the questionnaire were rated as age-independent. Secondly, when age was reported to influence on competence this effect was most typically positive, indicating improvement by age. Thirdly, all of the general competence domains listed were rated important or very important. Fourthly, most of those competence domains, which were rated most important by a majority of the respondents were also the ones that were rated to improve by age. Some of these very important domains - productivity, skills related to new technology, and learning ability - were reported to be age-independent.

Most of the competence domains upon which the subjects were asked to respond in the questionnaire represented the so-called meta-competence (Nordhaug, 1991) or key skills (Bjørnåvold, 1997) area in the total job competence. This type of competence is viewed increasingly important in the current working life, as was also indicated by our results here. Taken that our results, based on the experiences of the older workers themselves, showed that this kind of competence improves by age, we can conclude that these results give evidence of the special strengths of older workers in working life.

Therefore, concerning that part of job competence these results and the experiences of older workers themselves, suggest that the common stereotypical and ageist thinking on them is inaccurate, to say the least. It needs to be kept in mind, however, that the technical-instrumental skills as one domain in job competence were not included in the age-assessment in this study. Had we addressed them as well, the results would likely have been less encouraging. A conclusion therefore is that we should be more attentive to the multi-dimensional nature of job competence. Furthermore, these results imply that a collective approach to competence in a working place would be more fruitful than focusing on individuals. A starting point for an HRD policy then would be that the strengths and weaknesses should be monitored throughout the staff and on the basis of continuity. Guiding

lines in such a policy would be complementarity of competence and lifelong learning and development.

The results showed that in many respects age was not reported to have any effect on the domains of competence assessed. It is important to note that this result gives no indication of the actual level of these competencies. The fact that the subjects participating in this study were higher educated than this age group on the average, may play a role here, although it cannot be confirmed on the basis of these results.

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Appendix 1. Means and standard deviations of employees' ratings of how has age effected on their job competence required in work, and of the importance of these competence domains in their work (n= 91)

	Effect of age		Importance	
Domain of competence	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.
Experience	2.78	.41	2.66	.48
Social skills	2.70	.46	2.69	.47
Ability to make decisions	2.64	.53	2.57	.54
Problem solving ability	2.58	.54	2.67	.50
Learning ability	2.50	.53	2.50	.53
Flexibility (in work)	2.34	.50	2.47	.50
Creativity	2.32	.67	2.32	.67
Ability to handle stress	2.29	.75	2.59	.52
Initiative	2.13	.59	2.34	.59
Willingness to learn new things	2.09	.42	2.44	.52
Adaptability to change	2.07	.54	2.48	.50
Learning and development needs	2.00	.48	2.41	.52
Productivity	1.99	.52	2.49	.63
Willingness to participate in training	1.92	.52	2.39	.51
Skills related to new technology	1.79	.46	2.49	.55
Physical capacity	1.46	.58	2.38	.55

Scale used: 3=Getting better, 2=Staying stable, 1=Getting worse